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NOTES ON GOETHE'S FAUST.*

THE question of the character of Mephisto and his relation to the Earth Spirit is perhaps the most far-reaching Faust problem. It involves not only the meaning of individual passages and scenes, but the artistic value, the unity of the whole play, and it cannot be separated from our ideas about the intellectual freedom of young Goethe, about the power of his poetic imagination and creative genius, and the seriousness of the author's attitude, in later years, toward matters of literary ethics.

In dealing with this question, then, the student must all the more carefully guard against being biassed by any personal desire, either to praise or to find fault with the great poet or his work.

Did Goethe originally plan his Mephisto to be, not an infernal demon, a devil, but a minion of the ethically neutral Earth Spirit? Was his Earth Spirit to appear a second time on the stage, and was he, not Mephisto to enter into some agreement with Faust whereby the latter received Mephisto as a companion? Did Goethe write nearly the whole of part 1 of his Faust—except verses 605 to 1770—with this Mephisto and with some such plan in his mind, and did he later—perhaps in 1797—throw his plan overboard and substitute for the minion of the Earth Spirit another Mephisto, the Christian Devil? Such questions were raised for the first time in 1837 by Weisse who devoted to the exposition of his double-plan theory a large portion of his excellent “*Kritik und Erläuterung des Goetheschen Faust.*” This theory seems, however, not to have attracted the attention of scholars until Kuno Fischer developed it more fully in his commentary and in the lectures on Faust which he gave for many years before an ever larger and more enthusiastic public at the University of Heidelberg. In 1873 Konstantin Roess-

*Written in January, 1908.

ler likewise detected in Mephisto two incompatible characters and in substance characterized the poet's procedure as a deception such as no poet had ever dared to practice upon an unsuspecting public. At present some of the foremost Faust scholars in Germany—men like Witkowski and Max Morris—have essentially adopted the views of Weisse-Fischer and—"was wir verstehen, das können wir nicht tadeln"—the change of plan, once recognized as inevitable, has gradually become to be regarded as comparatively immaterial so far as the intrinsic beauty and value of the whole play is concerned.

It was natural enough, then, that our latest American Faust editors, Thomas and Goebel, while differing with each other in various details should both have accepted the old and orthodox view; the one, Thomas, setting it forth as a matter of course, virtually in perfect accordance with Fischer, the other, Goebel, adding even some new material intended to show that young Goethe could not have conceived the plan which he developed in 1797 in the Prologue in Heaven.

Indeed both our editors evidently consider the double-plan theory so well established that they do not even mention the fact that a good deal has been said on the other side and that there are Faust scholars who consider Fischer's theory very much like a night-mare, of which we shall have to rid ourselves before we can come to a just appreciation of the play.

Their books are intended primarily for use in our college classes to be supplemented by the teacher. Goebel, to be sure, warns his readers from time to time by some such expressions as "it seems to me," "I am convinced," etc. Indeed he uses such qualifying terms in regard to a few points of which others have been convinced for some time, and altogether the atmosphere of rich, yet one-sidedly aggressive scholarship, of "dumpfes warmes Streben," which pervades Goebel's work, arouses in the serious student a sufficient amount of interest mixed with irritation to induce further study. Thomas on the other hand with clearcut and dispassioned style easily leaves the student under the impression that the editor's data exhaust the subject.

In any case, few students and even not all teachers have library facilities and leisure enough to go far into the critical study of literary problems, and a brief statement of the arguments on both sides of the question may therefore be welcome to many of our readers. Its publication in this Journal will not seem out of place, if in presenting our views we succeed in contributing to the sum total of Faust literature a few observations of some value for the better understanding of Goethe's great work. The chief arguments adduced in favor of the double-plan theory are the following:

Young Goethe, at the time when the plot was beginning to haunt him, had become deeply interested in Neo-Platonic speculations, in medieval witchcraft and the seventeenth century renewal of Mysticism. He had been studying and brooding over Iamblichos, Welling, Nostradamus, Agrippa of Nettesheim, Weigel, and perhaps first and most of all over Arnold's Kirchen- und Ketzergeschichte, and he had abandoned himself to their teachings; and besides, he had early identified himself with his hero, Faust, to such a degree that the introduction of a christian devil was out of the question for him. The Earth Spirit had become to him the most impressive manifestation of the Divine, more personally, more sympathetic than the all-powerful, but remote ruler of the universe. And the Earth-Spirit could send to his Faust only a minion of his own, a more or less mischievous spiritus familiaris or, according to Goebel, an evil genius, but by no means a devil, a tempter. Moreover, two passages, "Wald und Höhle" and "Trüber Tag" have found their way from the earlier version, the Fragment Urfaust, into the final text, which bear unmistakable evidence of the poet's conception of Mephisto as having been sent to Faust by the Earth Spirit. In "Wald und Höhle" Faust apparently addresses the Earth Spirit thus:

"Erhabner Geist, du gabst mir alles, warum ich bat—warum gabst du . . . mir den Gefährten mit, den ich nun schon nicht mehr entbehren kann?"

And in "Trüber Tag" Faust again appeals to the Earth Spirit thus:

“Grosser herrlicher Geist! der du mir zu erscheinen würdigtest, der du mein Herz kennest und meine Seele! (!!), warum an den Schandgesellen mich schmieden,” etc.

Having once accepted these circumstances—proof of an earlier Mephisto, non-infernal, but belonging to the sphere of a terrestrial spirit,—Kuno Fischer found it possible also to show that Mephisto, including the Gretchen tragedy, does indeed not behave like a devil. This interpretation of Mephisto's character has been adopted by Thomas, while Goebel acknowledges that he is at the outset a rather wicked spirit, Faust's evil genius whom the good Earth Spirit has sent to Faust for some reasons which, owing to Goethe's subsequent modification of his plan we no longer can hope to discover. Altogether out of the study of Mephisto's character Goebel does not appear to derive much support for his theory. He even admits the early admixture of devilish traits, but on the strength of the other motives he too insists that the Mephisto of the early plan belongs into the sphere of the Earth Spirit and was sent by him.

What has been or can legitimately be said against the whole double-plan theory is this:

The fact that Goethe early identified himself with his hero has nothing to do with the character of Mephisto or the ultimate outcome of the drama. Indeed as man and as poet he naturally shows a tendency to intensify his personal experiences. Where he had been tempted his nerves succumb and cause or suffer ruin. His Faust could well contain a good deal of himself and yet be a “Teufelsbeschwörer” and, if need be, fall victim to the tempter.

And as to Alchemy and Neo-Platonism, there is nothing in Goethe's life to prove, and there is much that will disprove the assertion that these speculations ever gained control over him so completely as to crowd from his horizon the atmosphere of popular christianity and to make it impossible for him to introduce a common traditional devil into his play. In fact autobiographical motives and personal experiences were never allowed by Goethe to disturb his poetic plans; least of all in his youth when his literary ambitions and interests were especially strong. His

"confessions," even his autobiography, were always carefully shaped to suit his artistic purposes. This perfect control of Goethe, the artist, over Goethe, the naive confessor, is too often lost sight of.

Some unmistakable facts will prove the truth of these counter-assertions in the present case.

The only time when Neo-Platonic speculations could at all be thought to have gotten hold of Goethe's inner life was in 1769 during and after his illness. A few months later, in Strassburg, the many new impressions which he received with the eagerness of a Samuel Pepys, the influence of Herder's historical and critical habit of thought left no room or inclination for lonely brooding over theosophical problems. Here he studies his subject no longer with the naive curiosity and receptiveness of an overawed novice, but with the calm discrimination of a young scholar. And indeed this free or historical attitude toward his subject he did not owe entirely to Herder. He had even before leaving Frankfurt, studied not only Welling, the *Aurea Catena*, and such like mystifying treatises, but also Arnold, and he had found him the most congenial of all. So at Strassburg the Faust story must have haunted him. But no writing, no plan. His theosophical studies, however, made Faust's *character* and the milieu surrounding Faust more significant.

Perhaps the old puppet play story was also more or less unconsciously gaining a deeper significance to him. * * *

Aus verschiedenen Gründen, die aber in Wirklichkeit alle nur geltend gemacht werden, um den wirklichen Pakt noch plausibler zu machen, und Faust Zeit zu lassen, sich an Mephisto zu gewöhnen, schliesst die Studierzimmerszene, ohne dass es zum Pakt kommt. Mephisto konnte als Gefangener gar keinen gültigen Vertrag schliessen, er hätte ja als Gefangener Fausts von diesem zur Annahme jeder Bedingung gezwungen werden können. Als "dummer Teufel" musste er sich einführen, um zunächst recht harmlos zu erscheinen, aber beim ernstesten Vertrag musste er frei und der Versucher sein. * * *

Noch einmal spielt das Motiv des eigentlich gewünschten spiritus familiaris, die Erinnerung an die letzten Worte des Erdgeistes, herein: "Der grosse Geist hat mich verschmäht, in deinen Rang gehör' ich nur": Faust erblickt in Mephisto im kritischen Moment des Vertrags, den er dadurch noch weiter vor sich rechtfertigt, den Geist, den der Erdgeist, sein Erdengott, ihm zugewiesen hat. In trotzigem Selbstvertrauen—er fürchtet sich ja schon im ersten Monolog weder vor Hölle noch Teufel—nimmt er Mephisto zum Begleiter an. Diese Fiktion, eine Selbsttäuschung, die eben ein Motiv dramatischer Ironie ist, hält er auch später in kritischen Momenten aufrecht (in "Wald und Höhle" und "Trüber Tag"). Vielleicht spielt dies Motiv bei ihm auch in der Gretchen-Tragödie mit; er weiss, dass Mephisto ein Teufel ist; er liebt Gretchen, aber selbst durch ihre Liebe veredelt, scheut er sich nicht, Mephisto zu gebrauchen, weil er sich dazu vom Erdgeist, seinem Gott, ermutigt, genötigt glaubt.

Dass Mephisto von vornherein ein böser Geist ist, ein Versucher, wird von Fischer und anderen geleugnet. Er ist es ganz unleugbar (Gretchentragödie)! Goebel leugnet es nicht. Aber wie erklärt er es dann, dass der Erdgeist dem Faust einen bösen Geist schickt? Der Dämon, den die "Creatores" jedem Menschen zuschicken, ist doch der eigentliche Genius, die Verkörperung der Qualitäten gerade dieses Menschen, also genau dem Charakter des einzelnen Menschen entsprechend, und er gesellt sich seinem Menschen doch gewiss von Anfang an bei.

* * * *

Faust kann nicht absichtlos den Teufel beschwören. Er beschwört Geister, aber nicht böse Geister—dabei dann allmähliche Reduktion seines Titanismus: Der Weltgeist ist ihm selber zu weit ab. Der Erdgeist wird beschwört, erscheint aber nur, um Faust zu demütigen durch den offenbaren Abstand zwischen beiden. Er verweist Faust auf einen geringeren Geist. Diesen wäre Faust wohl zu beschwören bereit, doch könnte derselbe *nicht* ein böser Geist sein. "Du gleichst dem Geist, den du begreifst." Gleichet denn Faust irgendwie einem bösen Geist? Nun gilt es

aber, dem noch zu weiterem Geisterverstehn ermutigten und bereiten Faust Mephisto, den Teufel, vorzuführen. Faust *kann* ihn, wie gesagt, seiner ganzen Natur und Absicht nach, nicht beschwören wollen, auch kann der Teufel nicht wohl statt eines anderen, etwa heraufzubeschwörenden Geistes erscheinen: denn Faust ist ja ein beschwörungskundiger Mann, der den rechten Spruch wohl kennt. Also muss Mephisto zunächst *ohne* Beschwörung sich Faust nahen (als Pudel), ihn wohl eine Weile als solcher auf niedrige Weise unterhalten, sich einschmeicheln, dann sich im rechten Momente auffälligmachen, um sich beschwören zu lassen.

Faust vermutet in ihm zunächst einen ethisch neutralen (wie Erdgeist) Elementargeist; dann erkennt er in ihm das infernale Element, denkt zunächst gar nicht daran, sich mit ihm dauernd einzulassen. Nun will er ihn näher kennen lernen (natürlicher Teil der Beschwörung). Erst als Mephisto sich gefangen erklärt, auf "Gesetz" der Teufel hinweist, kommt Faust auf die Idee eines Pakts. (Dieser Gedanke möglichst plausibel gemacht; ins Garn gegangen, etc.)